

# The Mysterious Ferguson Rock

By Merle T. Cole and Tom Sopher

**T**he Ferguson Rock is the oldest known landmark in Beckley. Traditional stories about the rock differ, but all focus on the activities of a mysterious "S. Ferguson."

In November 1939, *Raleigh Register* "Bug Dust" columnist Randolph Norton described Ferguson as an "old pioneer" who came to grief in 1814 while traveling from Virginia to the Kanawha Valley to "seek his fortune." After spending the previous night near Pack's Ferry on New River, Ferguson rode all day on the long-disappeared Old Bluestone Road. When he reached the Piney Creek ford near the current sewage treatment plant, he stopped to allow his horse to drink. A bear or panther ran from the bush and frightened the horse, which threw Ferguson into the stream, breaking his leg. The horse ran back up the trail and, several days later, arrived at Ferguson's home in Franklin County, Virginia.

His family eventually discovered his corpse on the stream bank. He'd died after carving his epitaph into a nearby rock: "S. Ferguson F. County 1814." As a notable detail, the figure 4 was carved backwards. The family buried his remains on the spot, without a coffin. The rock was left in the creek bed.

County historian Jim Wood put more stock in a less interesting but more probable story recorded by early county

historian Judge Winton A. Riffe. The judge contended, "S. Ferguson more likely was a member of the noted Ferguson fur-trapping family of Franklin County, Virginia, and that instead of being his death site, the carved rock represented his camp site."

Fast forward to 1899, when the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway was building its branch line from Prince to Raleigh. Anderson Warden, a member of the work party, remembered seeing the rock and the gravesite. Some 40 years later, in November 1939, Anderson was employed by the Northeastern Construction Company "to move some dirt and rock at the sewage plant." He came upon the rock again and learned that other workers had located a gravesite "earlier in the fall." Warden moved the rock to the foot of the grave on November 11, 1939. The foot of the grave was used because "the head . . . is under the highway that separates two units of the sewage system."

While the exact meaning of the inscription is disputed, there's one historically significant point. The date on the rock is nearly four decades before Raleigh County was formed from Fayette County, in 1850.

The rock was saved from destruction a second time in 1984, when the sewage plant was being expanded. Ray Sutphin



Photo of the Ferguson Rock, now located in Beckley, by David Sibray.

of Beckley heard from a friend that the construction crew was piling material on the rock. When he expressed concern to a sanitation department supervisor, he was asked if he wanted the rock. Sutphin said he did, and it was transported to his home. The Ferguson Rock remained there through changes in property ownership.

In November 2017, the Raleigh County Historical Society (RCHS) contacted the then-current property owners about donating the rock to the City of Beckley for historical purposes. James Bays and

Amy Kirk readily agreed, and shortly thereafter, city public works retrieved the rock. Following a brief period in storage, the rock was moved to its present home on the grounds of Wildwood House, the historic home of city Founder Alfred E. Beckley. It has become another RCHS preservation project. 🍁

MERLE T. COLE and TOM SOPHER are very active members of the Raleigh County Historical Society. Merle has made numerous contributions to GOLDENSEAL, particularly on the topic of West Virginia State Police history. Tom is president of the historical society. This is his first contribution to GOLDENSEAL.